

Metro Blue Line Was State's Deadliest Rail Transit System

■ **Safety:** Ten people died in accidents along the 22-mile stretch between downtown and Long Beach, report says.

By HUGO MARTIN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Despite safety improvements, the Metro Blue Line held the title as California's deadliest rail transit system in 1999, tallying 10 deaths and 40 injuries along the 22-mile line connecting Long Beach with downtown Los Angeles.

The 1999 Blue Line statistics were worse than those for 1998, when the line had nine fatalities and 30 injuries in 47 accidents, according to a report published this month by the state Public Utilities Commission. Most of the 50 accidents along the Blue Line last year involved collisions with motor vehicles at street crossings.

The number of motor vehicle accidents per rail mile of the Blue Line was more than twice the rate for the next highest system, the Santa Clara Valley rail line, the report said.

Motor vehicle accident rates dropped last year for light rail systems in San Francisco, San Diego, Sacramento and Santa Clara. But the Blue Line's rate jumped 20% in 1999 over 1998, the report said.

Officials of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which operates the Blue Line, said the increase probably was caused by the growing number of motorists making illegal left turns into the path of the train along Washington Boulevard, south of downtown Los Angeles. The rail line runs down the middle of the street along a two-mile stretch there.

"Why they are doing that, who knows?" said MTA spokesman Ed Scannell. The agency is launching a billboard campaign to warn motorists about the dangers of illegal left turns.

MTA officials said the number of accidents is not a surprise, considering that the rail line has 101 street crossings through some of the most densely populated communities in the state.

"You have thousands and thousands of people crossing every day," Scannell said.

He said six of last year's 10 Blue Line deaths were caused by a single accident. An unlicensed taxi driver in November was struck trying to outrun a southbound train in Compton. The driver and five passengers were killed.

Since then, Scannell said, there have been no fatalities on the Blue Line.

Safety Measures Introduced

The MTA has launched several new safety measures along the Blue Line route to reduce the accident rate. They include:

- A public outreach campaign.
- The assignment of eight county sheriff's deputies to watch for motorists and pedestrians trying to pass lowered crossing gates. Fines were increased last year to \$271.
- The installation of 10 cameras at 17 locations to photograph motorists who try to get around lowered gates. Authorities can use photographs of the license plates to issue citations. This year, the MTA plans to add six more cameras.
- State approval for new crossing gates that are more difficult for motorists to bypass. The gates—which use four arms instead of two—were tested at 124th Street in Willowbrook. The MTA plans to install the gates on 10 other rail crossings over the next five years.

Construction also is expected to begin in November on a pedestrian bridge over the Blue Line at the intersection of 55th Street and Long Beach Avenue in South Los Angeles. That is where 13-year-old Gilberto Reynaga was struck and killed last summer as he and a friend darted across the tracks.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, who heads the MTA Board of Directors and represents most of the communities bisected by the Blue Line, said she is concerned by the high accident rates but hopes the MTA's safety efforts will reduce the number of deaths and injuries.

Rail Transit Accidents in 1999

Transit Agency	Accidents*	Killed	Injured**
MTA Blue Line	50	10	40
Sacramento Regional Transit District	13	4	48
San Diego Trolley Inc.	25	3	14
Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority	22	2	4
BART—Bay Area Rapid Transit District	15	2	7
MTA Red Line	3	1	2
San Francisco Municipal Railway	107	1	74
MTA Green Line	1	0	1
San Francisco Cable Car	29	0	29

* Includes 11 suicides and attempted suicides

** Any person taken to a medical facility for treatment is considered to have been injured.

Source: California Public Utilities Commission

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LA Times

Trying to Grab Pedestrians' Attention

By DOUGLAS P. SHUIT
TIMES STAFF WRITER

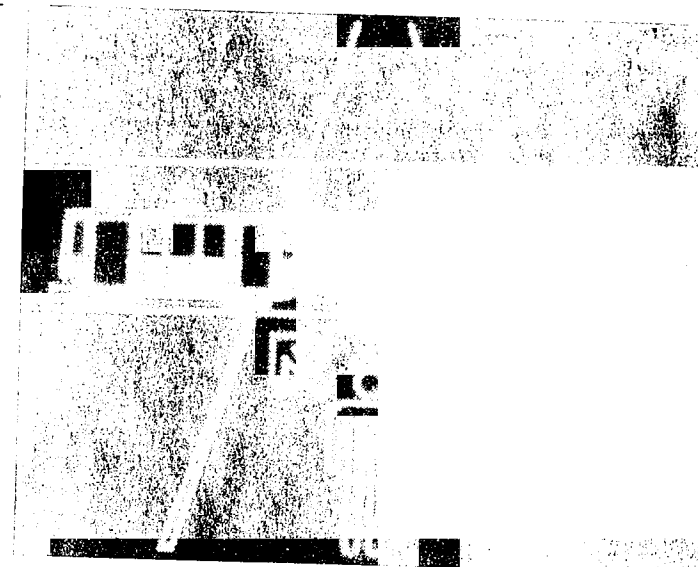
The MTA unveiled a state-of-the-art pedestrian warning sign Friday for its Metro Rail Blue Line, part of continuing efforts to turn around what has been the deadliest light rail system in California.

The fiber optic sign, said to be the only one of its kind in the nation, hangs over the pedestrian walkway to the Vernon Avenue station near Long Beach Avenue.

At least 16 accidents, including four deaths, have occurred at the intersection since 1990. Overall, 54 pedestrians and drivers have been killed along the Blue Line since it began running between downtown Los Angeles and Long Beach. The line had more fatalities than California's four other light rail systems combined in the six years ending with 1999, California Public Utilities Commission records show.

The heavy number of accidents at the Vernon crossing made it a prime candidate for testing the sign, said Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials, who paid for it with a \$200,000 federal grant.

Should the sign prove success-



Fiber optic sign warns pedestrians of danger from Blue Line train.

ful—and it has been effective in early tests—the MTA plans to introduce it at other problem intersections.

The sign's vivid yellow-on-black images begin flashing and moving whenever a train approaches the intersection. Its designers say they spent months interviewing pedestrians until they got the

graphics just right. Vijay Khawani, director of MTA rail safety operations, said the agency tested signs with text and graphics and decided on the graphics because of language difficulties.

"We found this particular sign was the preferred sign by the majority of the people we surveyed," Khawani said.

The MTA blames the accidents on motorists and pedestrians who walk or drive against signals.

After 10 deaths during 1999, the MTA got through 2000 with just one fatality. Officials credit their ongoing safety campaign.

One of the steps taken by the MTA was increasing police patrols along the Blue Line under contracts with the Sheriff's Department and Los Angeles Police Department. Officers have been writing citations by the basketfuls for pedestrians and drivers caught ignoring signals. One sheriff's deputy wrote 1,898 citations alone in 2000.

The MTA also lobbied the Legislature to increase fines from \$104 to \$271, which took effect last year.

Also, a demonstration project using four barrier gates along the tracks at 124th Street and Willowbrook Avenue, rather than the traditional two, has proved so successful that the MTA will install them at 10 other intersections.

As part of their campaign, officials have delivered safety messages to 50,000 public school students, church congregations and community groups.

LA Times

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Walkway Over Tracks Nearly Done

Safety: The \$1.6-million Long Beach bridge will help avert accidents.

From a Times Staff Writer

A much-anticipated South-Central Los Angeles pedestrian bridge spanning four sets of tracks on Long Beach Avenue is near completion. City officials hope the new project leads to a reduction in train-related accidents.

Construction on the East 53rd Street walkway began in February. Pedestrians will start using it to cross the MTA Blue Line and Union Pacific railroad tracks by September, officials said.

The MTA and Caltrans funded the \$1.6-million bridge.

The Blue Line was deemed the deadliest rail transit system in the state, according to a 1999 report by the state Public Utilities Commission.

The report, the most recent data on statewide rail safety, tallied 10 deaths and 40 injuries along the 22-mile line connecting Long Beach with downtown Los Angeles.

Los Angeles City Councilwoman Rita Waters began pushing for the MTA to fund a pedestrian bridge in 1992, said Antonio Watson, a member of Waters' public works and transportation staff.

Safety concerns over the busy railway that runs through the Pueblo Del Rio housing project were heightened in 1999 when 13-year-old Gilberto Reynaga was hit and killed in an attempt to dash across the tracks.

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